



Participatory Practices: Learning From Experience*

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Promoting Village Participation in Disaster Mitigation *The USAID/Niger Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation Project¹*

THE CHALLENGE

Semi-arid, resource poor, and landlocked, the Sahelian country of Niger is extremely vulnerable to natural and manmade disasters and to medical emergencies. Recurring drought-related famines undermine the country's development efforts.

In the early 1990s there was a clear need both to improve the disaster and early warning response capabilities of the Government of Niger (GON) and to reinforce local capacities to undertake appropriate mitigation activities. To create a more flexible emergency response system, the Mission proposed and funded a Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation Program (DPM). By engaging communities in locally driven mitigation activities, the DPM program strengthened the GON's disaster response capabilities while also laying the ground work for sustainable development at the local level.

THE PARTICIPATORY PRACTICE: Engaging Local Communities and Building Government Capacity

SAP/GC (Système d'Alerte Précoce/Gestion de Crises), the vulnerability assessment and crisis management unit of the GON, was created in late 1989 to strengthen the disaster early warning and response capabilities of the GON and to reinforce local capacities to undertake appropriate

USAID PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE is a case study series of participatory approaches in USAID programs. The case studies are intended to help staff consider similar approaches and share experiences. USAID's Participation Forum and GP-NET, an electronic conversation group, enable development practitioners worldwide to discuss problems and successes in the use of participation. For further information please e-mail Diane La Voy (dlavoy@usaid.gov) or Chanya Charles (ccharles@aed.org).

Marion Pratt and Tara Mitchell drafted the following summary after extensive consultation with the USAID/Niger Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation Assessment Team and a thorough review of available documentation. March 1997.

mitigation activities. SAP produced a vulnerability analysis annually using information from various individuals and institutions. The analysis was based on a vulnerability index calculated for each arrondissement in Niger based on questionnaires completed by local technical staff. Once the data had been confirmed at the departmental level, the analysis was finalized at a yearly meeting that included donors, NGOs, individuals from each department, and SAP headquarters staff. The vulnerability analysis enabled the government to determine areas of the country that are most likely to suffer food shortages in a given year.

Under the auspices of SAP, the DPM program set up an Emergency Fund to support local-level disaster preparedness and mitigation activities. The activities were proposed by the village leaders or by government technical staff in response to locally perceived problems. The proposed ideas were then prioritized by a subregional technical committee comprised of staff from all the line ministries.

The technical committee then turned these ideas into formal, written proposals that were submitted to SAP, where they were scored based on probability of success. For those receiving high scores, contracts were then drawn up between SAP and the subregional technical committees. Subsequently, SAP transferred money from the Emergency Fund to a government financial comptroller at the county level. The comptroller dispursed funds as needed for purchases of materials or direct payments of salaries to the technical unit project officer. The food aid component was essentially a performance based contract with the village management committee. SAP purchased a predetermined quantity of cereal which was delivered to the local management committee. Once the first few projects were undertaken, other villages heard about them and proposed projects of their own, or asked to be included in a neighboring village's activities.

The types of mitigation activities undertaken by the communities included the construction of micro-catchments to enhance the water retention capacity of agricultural grazing lands, wells for vegetable production, firebreaks, flood diversion dikes, situation dams, anti-erosion water diversion structures, and semi-lunes to expand rangeland vegetation. Most of the projects involved a food-for-work component. The village management committees decided how the food was managed and distributed, which individuals were eligible to participate in the project, and how much work needed to be completed on a daily basis in order to ensure that the project was finished according to schedule. The DPM program was able to meet the emergency food needs of people who were not able to find work, especially during the dry season, and at the same time improve rural infrastructure, agricultural production, economic production, and the local environment.

A military coup on January 27, 1996, and subsequent election fraud obligated the Mission to terminate all bilateral aid to Niger. While direct assistance from USAID to the GON has been terminated, locally initiated disaster mitigation activities continued through CARE.

OUTCOME

Although only a relatively small number (68) of mitigation activities were completed before the closeout of the Mission and their long-term effects are not yet evident, each of the projects engaged civil participation and local initiative. The Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation program under the auspices of SAP/GC improved communication among national and sub-national structures, between government and village organizations, and between village organizations and individual villagers, thus strengthening the capacity of the GON to respond more effectively to vulnerable populations.

At the national level, the GON was able to incorporate community-driven initiatives to national food security strategies. National level officials developed practices to respond more effectively to constituents. The regional committee members learned how, when, and why to transfer information gained from the national level to the local level, and from the local level to the national level. At the village level, individuals gained the skills and experience necessary to take a more active role in problem identification, prioritization, and resolution. The villagers' active participation also enabled them to find channels to articulate and propose solutions to future problems.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- 1) The bottom-up approach to identifying and implementing the food-for-work projects engaged the local populations and the technical ministries in a collaborative program. This appears to have contributed to local democratic governance: it strengthened officials' commitment and accountability to citizens by demonstrating to citizens that they can propose and receive useful assistance from government officials.
- 2) The fluid composition of the regional and subregional technical committees encouraged the formation of customer-focused teams tailored to the requirements of each type of intervention. Thus, the ability to match team members' technical qualifications to activity type, such as design of micro-catchments or firebreaks, facilitated efficient use of institutional capacities.
- 3) Since villagers were responsible for both identifying and implementing the mitigation interventions, they were able to transcend their roles as recipients of food assistance. Instead they became active initiators of self-help efforts that were made possible by the provision of food assistance to participants.
- 4) In some highly vulnerable food-deficit areas, the numbers of people requesting food for work compromised the capacity of the site managers to maintain an efficient and controlled work program. This problem poses a dilemma in effectively carrying out food-for-work interventions.

- 5) In many of the sites, women appeared to be inadequately informed about the function and purpose of the DPM program, even though they worked with men as laborers. To more fully engage women's ideas and initiatives, USAID could have worked with DPM officials to develop a proactive approach to involve women in more decision-making and management roles at the subregional and village levels.

RESOURCES

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